

Good Woman, Bad Woman

In Afghanistan, a good woman knows to keep her counsel when she comes up against violence. Women too feel that it is their lot and duty to keep silent.

As I live in this society, I have seen how this precept is followed by most of my friends, neighbours and relatives.

A good woman is one who gets up early in the morning to care for the home, she does not go out, she ignores her own wellbeing and spends all her time with children, home and cooking. She does not dream about having a job or studying. She knows that once she is married, she must not use heavy make-up or dress attractively.

A woman who answers to this description is an ideal, and most families hope to find such a daughter-in-law for their son.

Everything depends on the kind of a family you marry into.

I have a friend who is a very kind and pleasant young woman. She used to work as a journalist and was quite successful at it. When she married, she had to leave her job – because of old ways of thinking and because she had her family's reputation to consider.

When I met her, I could hardly believe she was the same person. She seemed so exhausted. She had lost her hope, and her new life had drained her strength. She had tried her best to adapt to her new life and family, but she could not change who she was. It is hard to pretend you have changed when at heart you are still the same person.

According to Afghan thinking, a woman is good and a 'success' when she keeps her family together and accepts the authority of her husband. A good woman is long-suffering and keeps her own counsel even if she is dissatisfied with her life. She accepts traditional thinking even if she hates her life by her husband's side. She does not demand her rights for fear of bringing shame on her family. She locks up all her woes in her heart and accepts her lot in order to seem like a good woman and serve as an example to others.

In Afghanistan, all you need to be ostracised is to dress differently. Many people think they have the right to judge others. Violating the dress code can be enough for people to sever all their ties to you.

Frequently such cases also involve violence by women against women. In most families, women have internalised the culture of oppression. They themselves uphold oppression and damaging beliefs – both within the family and in society.

If a woman musters the courage to demand her rights; if she refuses to consider herself inferior to men; if she asserts that we are all equal, with equal rights and that we can live as we like – she is called a bad woman.

'Bad' means that she does not conform to the ideal. I have seen this many times with my own eyes, and I have seen it in my own life. I can see how my husband's family looks at me; I can feel what they are thinking. I know that I am not an ideal daughter-in-law, even though we get along fine and I show respect for them.

My lot is to clean the house and serve others. I am not entitled to any needs or wishes of my own. I am expected to ask permission every time I want to leave the house. I am supposed to place my husband's shoes in front of him when he leaves the house; that is what he would wish me to do.

To protect the reputation of my mother and my father, I must accept everything that my husband tells me. I cannot divorce him, because people would look down on my parents and tell them that their daughter is a bad woman. I must be on guard against the thoughts of other people also for my own sake; if I were to divorce I would be a bad woman in their eyes – a good woman does not get a divorce. No one wants to marry a divorcee.

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